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EA 001 165

THE STATUS OF PASS-FAIL OPTIONS AT TWENTY-TWO COLLEGES AND
UNIVERSITIES. A REPORT.

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PUB DATE NOV 67

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.68 15P.

DESCRIPTORS- *COLLEGES, *UNIVERSITIES, *PASS FAIL GRADING,
*GRADE POINT AVERAGE, STUDENT ADJUSTMENT, STUDENT EVALUATION,
AMHERST,

FROM INFORMATION OBTAINED BY QUESTIONNAIRES FROM 20 OF
25 PROVOSTS OR ACADEMIC VICE-PRESIDENTS, THIS SURVEY REPORT
OUTLINES MAIN FEATURES OF THE PASS-FAIL OPTION AS OFFERED AT
NINE COLLEGES OR UNIVERSITIES AND THE EXTENT TO WHICH SUCH AN
OPTION IS BEING CONSIDERED BY OTHER SCHOOLS. WHILE
CONSIDERABLE VARIATION IN SPECIFIC PASS-FAIL PROGRAMS IS
REPORTED, GENERAL PRACTICES INCLUDE--(1) FRESHMEN ARE NOT
ALLOWED THE OPTION, (2) STUDENTS ARE ALLOWED ONE PASS-FAIL
COURSE A TERM, WITH A LIMIT TO NUMBER OF CREDITS ALLOWED AND
NO SUCH CREDITS TO BE EARNED IN A STUDENT'S MAJOR FIELD, (3)
INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS OR DEPARTMENTS DECIDE WHICH COURSES ARE
PASS-FAIL, AND (4) THE GPA IS AFFECTED BY FAIL, BUT NOT BY
PASS. APPENDICES INCLUDE A SUMMARY OF RESPONSES AND AN
OUTLINE OF THE PASS-FAIL GRADING SYSTEM AT THE CALIFORNIA
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY. (JK)

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THE STATUS OF

PASS / FAIL

**OPTIONS AT TWENTY-TWO
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

A Report By Raymond G. Hewitt

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OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL STUDIES

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

November, 1967 (3rd Printing)

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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**THE STATUS OF PASS-FAIL OPTIONS
AT TWENTY-TWO COLLEGES
AND UNIVERSITIES**

A Report By Raymond G. Hewitt

Preface

The pass-fail grading option is currently attracting a great deal of attention at institutions around the nation. Many of the top schools in the nation currently offer the pass-fail option and many more are seriously considering adopting such a policy. While it is still too early to predict if pass-fail grading will become a permanent part of the evaluational machinery, it certainly leads to a reassessment of the present grading systems and stimulates new and perhaps better ideas.

The present study was undertaken in order to provide information for a Faculty Senate subcommittee considering instituting pass-fail grading here at the University of Massachusetts. The national interest in this study, however, has necessitated this, its third printing. While the body of the report remains unchanged, responses from the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania have been incorporated into Appendix A, the Summary of Responses. As can be seen at a glance, their systems do not differ greatly from those discussed in the text.

Many requests for other sources of information on pass-fail grading have reached my desk, but unfortunately the literature on pass-fail grading is scarce as is the research being done on it. Two good sources of information are, however, the Memo to the Faculty, No 22 printed by the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching and Mr. David L. Aiken's article "'Pass-Fail' Grading Option Adopted on Many Campuses" which appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education, Vol. 1, No. 7, February 22, 1967. With regard to research being done on pass-fail grading, the program mentioned in the text at the University of California at Santa Cruz and an evaluation currently being undertaken at the State University of New York at Cortland are the only projects I know of at the moment.

Raymond G. Hewitt

Amherst, Massachusetts
October 26, 1967

THE STATUS OF PASS-FAIL OPTIONS
AT TWENTY-TWO COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Methodology

A questionnaire was sent to the Provost or Academic Vice-President at 25 selected colleges and universities to determine the status of the pass-fail option at those institutions. The schools were selected to obtain data from several regions and from several types of the generally, but not exclusively, more "prestigious" institutions.

The questionnaire (see Appendix) had two parts. Part I sought information on the actual operation of the program, if the institution offered a pass-fail option. Part II asked the respondent to comment on the success of the option.

Results

At the time of this writing, 20 of the 25 questionnaires (80%) have been returned. Of these 20 responses, 9 schools currently offer the pass-fail option in some form, 3 indicated the pass-fail option will soon be available, 6 commented that such a system is now under serious consideration and 2 gave no indication of its status on their campus other than it was not presently available. A summary of these responses appears in the Appendix, but a closer look at a few individual responses would seem to be in order.

At Pomona College, juniors and seniors have had the pass-fail option available in elective courses outside their major for the past eight years. All freshman seminars are graded pass-fail. A student is allowed up to two courses a semester under this option with a maximum of four such courses to count toward graduation. The respondent felt that although a few students try to manipulate the option to improve their grade point average (GPA) /neither pass nor fail is registered in a student's cumulative average/ valid uses far outnumber possible abuses ... making the program a general success."

At Ohio State University, seniors, graduate students and professional students have been allowed to take certain courses under the pass-fail system in selected schools and colleges including the Graduate School and the Schools of Medicine and Education for "several years." Included are all courses in Medicine and specified courses either in or outside the student's major, e.g., thesis, minor problems, special seminars. There is no specific policy on the number of such courses a student may take and while the students will receive credit hours for an "S" (satisfactory) neither the "S" nor the "E" counts in his GPA. The respondent regarded their program, as outlined above, successful.

The California Institute of Technology began a pass-fail grading system in the fall of 1964 as an experiment to "encourage the development of an attitude in which a student sees himself as a self-guided scholar rather than as a competing grade-getter." Their program is unique in that there is no real "option" since all courses in the standard freshman curriculum, which all freshmen must take, are graded this way but no upper division courses (with one exception) are available under the pass-fail option. This policy was so successful that it becomes permanent in May, 1966 as a result of a "unanimous less one" faculty vote.

Among the reasons for adopting this policy permanently was the fact that the freshman attrition rate decreased considerably and that freshmen anxiety was not as evident. The morale among sophomores who had participated in the pass-fail program was also considerably higher. One negative effect was that some freshmen had "so conditioned themselves to the top awards that they suffered a real psychological shock when these awards, in the form of grades, were not obtainable."

A statement on the pass-fail grading system at the California Institute of Technology is appended to this report.

Of the remaining six schools presently offering the pass-fail option, only Stanford University, with one year of experience, had had this policy in effect longer than one term. At all six schools the option was available to both juniors and seniors and at all but one to sophomores as well. All freshmen at Stanford University and the University of California (Berkeley) and second term freshmen at Tufts University are allowed to participate in this program. At only two of these six institutions was the option limited to selected schools, but four of the respondents limited the option to courses outside the student's major. At Berkeley students were allowed to take courses in their major for a pass-fail grade with their major department's consent. At Oberlin College, although the option is generally available only in courses outside the student's major, "a faculty member may elect to have the Satisfactory-Unsatisfactory grade option apply for all students in a course. Enrollment in such a course does not deprive the student of his option." At Tufts University, Mount Holyoke College and Lehigh University, students were also allowed to take distribution requirements under the pass-fail option although at Lehigh University foreign languages are excluded.

At all six institutions a student was limited to one pass-fail course per term. Mount Holyoke College restricts the number of such courses in a student's college career to three, Lehigh University to four and Tufts University to eight. At none of these schools was a grade of "Pass" entered in the student's GPA, but at Tufts, Lehigh and Mount Holyoke "Fail" is included in the GPA.

Most of these respondents felt it was too early to judge how successful their policy had been. One school, however, although feeling it was too early to justify any firm judgement, felt that all students were not using the pass-fail as had been intended. While the faculty had hoped students

would use it as an opportunity to "explore new fields and broaden the base of their education", many students appeared to be using it to schedule a "safe" pass and reduce study and grade pressure.

Allegheny College plans on instituting a Satisfactory-Unsatisfactory option in September 1967. Juniors and seniors will be allowed one course a year in any elective outside their major, including distribution requirements, although individual departments may specify which courses may be taken on this basis. Neither grade would be counted in a student's GPA.

Syracuse University and Pennsylvania State University also have drafted tentative regulations for a pass-fail option that they feel will soon be in effect. At Syracuse University sophomores, juniors and seniors in good academic standing would be allowed one course per semester for up to eighteen semester hours toward graduation. Only courses outside a student's major would be allowed and the student's school or college may further restrict his choice. Only a fail would be entered in a student's GPA. The option at Pennsylvania State University would also be open to sophomores, juniors and seniors but possibly only in selected schools. Only one elective course outside a student's major would be allowed in a semester with up to 12 credits allowable towards graduation and neither pass nor fail would be entered in the GPA.

Michigan State University, Purdue University, Youngstown University and the University of Iowa are among those schools now seriously considering the pass-fail option. All the respondents seemed eager to learn more about how successful this system had been at other schools.

Although not included in this survey, Princeton University and the University of California - Santa Cruz have also had some experience with the pass-fail grading option. The pass-fail option at Princeton University, in effect since Spring term 1966, is available to all undergraduates. Only one elective course a year (outside the student's major) may be taken for a pass-fail grade. It is also interesting to note that if a student fails to take advantage of the option in any given academic year, he can not pick up the option later. Faculty members report only the regular grade; the Registrar's Office changes the grade to pass or fail and enters it as such on the student's record. No record is kept of the student's regular grade. It is too early to judge the success of the program.

At Santa Cruz, an experimental evaluation program has been in effect for the past five years. As stated in their 1966-67 Bulletin, "Evaluation will take three forms: faculty comment, comprehensive examinations, and grades." Concerning grades, "Students in lower division courses normally will be graded "Pass" or "Fail". Students in upper division courses will be graded "Pass" or "Fail" except that a Board of Studies, in courses required for the major in its field, may assign letter grades to students pursuing a major in that field." Thus, while the pass-fail is only one aspect of their evaluation scheme, they have had considerable experience with this method of grading. Their impression is that pass-fail does "give students courage to explore" and that while many students suffer some disorientation at the start,

most adjust and learn to "work for themselves." There are however, unresolved transcript and class rank problems, especially regarding the draft.

Conclusions

Although interest in the pass-fail option appears to be widespread, it still seems to be too new a concept for any significant evaluation. Those schools that have had any appreciable experience with this program, Pomona College (eight years), Ohio State University (several years), California Institute of Technology (3rd year), and Stanford University (one year) do, however, seem satisfied with the results.

Although there are many variations on the regulations governing pass-fail, several practices seem widespread. Generally, freshmen are not allowed the option. The student is usually only allowed one course a term, frequently with a maximum number of credits to be earned this way, and then not generally in his major field. Practice seems split on whether it should be available in all schools. There is some indication that individual schools or departments should be allowed to decide which courses will be available. And finally, although a pass does not affect the GPA, fail often does.

It seems that pass-fail options are being made available in a substantial number of institutions. Individual institutions it seems will, however, either have to experiment with the actual regulations necessary to make it a success on their campus or else wait several years before enough time will have passed for significant conclusions to be drawn from the experience of others.

Appendices

Appendix A

Summary of Responses

Institution ¹	Pass-Fail Option 1966-67	Indicated Under Consideration	Available to ²	Number of courses Allowable ³	"Fail" Entered In GPA ⁴	Successful ⁵
Allegheny College	No	Yes ⁶	J,S	1,2 ⁷	---	---
Bradley University	No	Yes	---	---	---	---
Cal. Inst. of Tech.	Yes	---	F only ⁸	No Choice ⁸	---	Yes
Lake Forest College	No	Yes	---	---	---	---
Lehigh University	Yes	---	J,S	1,4	Yes	TETT
Michigan State Univ.	No	Yes	---	---	---	---
Mount Holyoke College	Yes	---	So,J,S	1,3	Yes	TETT
Oberlin College	Yes	---	So,J,S	1,-	No	TETT
Ohio State University	Yes	---	S	No Policy	No	Yes
Penn. State University	No	Yes ⁶	So,J,S	1,4	No	---
Pomona College	Yes	---	J,S	2,4	No	Generally
Purdue University	No	Yes	---	---	---	---
Rutgers University*	---	---	---	---	---	---
Stanford University	Yes	---	F,So,J,S	1,-	No	"Definitely"
Syracuse University	No	Yes ⁶	So,J,S	1,6	Yes	---
Tufts University	Yes	---	So,J,S ⁹	1,8	Yes	TETT
Tulane University	No	No	---	---	---	---
Univ. of California - Berkeley	Yes	---	F,So,J,S	1,-	No	TETT
Univ. of Colorado	No	No	---	---	---	---
Univ. of Illinois*	---	---	---	---	---	---
Univ. of Iowa	No	Yes	---	---	---	---
Univ. of Michigan	Yes	---	J,S	1,4	---	Yes
Univ. of Penn.	Yes	---	So,J,S	1 or 2,4 or 6 ¹⁰	No	TETT
Univ. of Wisconsin*	---	---	---	---	---	---
Youngstown Univ.	No	Yes	---	---	---	---

¹*Indicates that no response has been received.

²F, freshmen; So, sophomores; J, juniors; S, seniors.

³Number allowable in a term, number allowable in a student's college career.

⁴None of the respondents entered Pass in GPA.

⁵TETT, too early to tell.

⁶In final stages of development.

⁷Limit is one in an academic year.

⁸See text and statement appended for explanation.

⁹Also 2nd semester freshmen.

¹⁰Depends on the school in which the student is enrolled.

Appendix B

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Pasadena, California 91109

Pass-Fail Grading System

The request for information regarding our Pass-Fail grading system in freshman courses has been so overwhelming that we are unfortunately not able to answer each inquiry individually. It is hoped that the following statement will give you the information you are seeking.

Purpose

The Pass-Fail experiment for freshmen was initiated in the fall of 1964 as a two-year experiment, for the purpose of attempting to reduce the competitive aspect of student academic life and to encourage the new student to experiment with pace and depth and emphasis. It was hoped that this would encourage the development of an attitude in which a student sees himself as a self-guided scholar rather than as a competing grade-getter, and the development of a more personal attitude toward study, one that will stay with the student in later years.

In May 1966, a faculty vote, unanimous less one, confirmed Pass-Fail for freshmen as permanent policy. Before voting, the faculty had spent nearly a month studying a report from the Committee on the Freshman Year which included the following items.

- Pro
1. Year-end freshman attrition was down from the average of recent graded years.
 2. What attrition there was fell almost entirely in the bottom quarter of the class among those in academic difficulties, in contrast to previous years in which it had been spread over the entire class and had included departure by transfer of good students.
 3. Voluntary participation in the Freshman Honors program had more than doubled under Pass-Fail.
 4. The Institute psychologist reported: "It had been my impression - admittedly a highly subjective one - that the freshmen I have seen who had Pass-Fail grading were less deeply and frantically anxious about their academic situation than was characteristic of freshmen I saw in earlier classes."

5. The sophomore performance of the first Pass-Fail class of freshmen was better than that of previous sophomore classes, and it is expected that sophomore attrition will be significantly less than in previous years.
6. Faculty who had had experience with freshman classes extending over several years reported that under Pass-Fail there was a significantly improved attitude toward learning for reasons other than grades. From a humanities instructor: "They're reading books again!"
7. This same improvement carried over into the sophomore year, "I would like to report that the morale of the sophomores in this class (a second-year course) was distinctly higher than in previous years. Their interest and spirit and general zest in scientific inquiry and concepts were noticeably greater."
8. A very large majority of the undergraduates were strongly in favor of Pass-Fail:
 - (a) A majority of the upperclassmen observed that the freshmen made constructive use of the freedom they were given under Pass-Fail.
 - (b) Almost all the freshmen said Pass-Fail significantly reduced competitive pressure among them.
 - (c) A large majority of both freshmen and sophomores believed Pass-Fail had made their adjustment from high school to Caltech much easier than they had anticipated.

Con

1. Freshmen substitute their own judgment, which is based on too limited an experience, in deciding what is worth working at. Thus they cut corners in laboratory work to the point where it is clear that they are not acquiring the skills embryo scientists should develop. A significant number of freshmen, with high 700 scores in CEEB Math and a presumed strong interest in math as a central feature of their science training, gave so little attention to theory, the conceptual aspects, of the required calculus course that they failed the final examination. They made the mistake of assuming that Pass-Fail gave them freedom to ignore all but the problem-solving techniques in the course.
2. Many freshmen clearly worked less and accomplished less than they would have under the stress of competition; some carried this to the point of a "just get by" attitude.
3. Some of the freshmen with the greatest potential had so conditioned themselves to the top awards of competition that

they suffered a real psychological shock when these awards, in the form of grades, were not obtainable.

Although some of the statements above are buttressed by numbers and tabulations from questionnaires (circulated to both faculty and students), almost the entire discussion in the faculty prior to the vote revolved around subjective judgments and evaluations. Many had expected that this faculty, composed largely of working scientists, would conduct this experiment on a "scientific" basis and would produce a significant publication filled with statistics and their related reliability checks. However, what the faculty wanted was a change in a subjective property - student attitude - and they felt this change could best be evaluated by sympathetic, perceptive, qualitative observations.

Facts

The "Pass" or "Fail" grade refers only to the final grade in a course as recorded by the Registrar. Homework continues to be assigned and evaluated, tests and examinations are given as before. All student work is numerically graded as before; in fact, instructors have made a very real (and successful) effort to increase the amount of evaluating information given to a freshman. The students are told in very clear terms that this grading is for their use as information and for self-evaluation. In the humanities courses, instructors' written comments on student papers are believed to be far more useful to the student than grades ever were.

There is no secret grading. Instructors' records contain only the same information as is given to the student.

In addition, senior faculty members have taken on the job of acting as advisers to ten freshmen each; these advisers receive extensive reports from the instructors of their advisees at least twice a term. This information, when integrated by the adviser and discussed with the advisee, gives the student a much better measure of his performance than he ever got from grades.

It is expected that all freshmen will make a serious attempt to meet their academic responsibilities; freshmen are allowed the entire year to make whatever adjustments are necessary to enable them to meet minimum academic standards. However, should any freshman conspicuously evade his academic responsibility, his continuance at the Institute may be reviewed by the Committee on Academic Standards and Honors at the end of any term.

There has been no significant effect from Pass-Fail on either transfer to other institutions or on draft deferments. Admissions officers at other institutions are not universally happy over receiving from a transfer applicant a gradeless, GPA-less transcript. However, so far in our experience, they have been universally cooperative in attempting to accommodate their entrance regulations to students who have been involved in educational experiments such as ours.

The answer is not as clear-cut in regard to the draft. A number of draft boards have indicated unhappiness over our inability to give a rank-in-class for a student at the end of his freshman year. However, the issue has been avoided so far by the fact that our students have scored well above the 70 guide line on the Draft Deferment Test, and on that basis have been able to press successfully for student deferment.

Comments

The side effects of the discussions about Pass-Fail have been as constructive as the grade change itself. Once the question of pressure from grades was raised, it was inevitable that questions would arise about the pressures from the curriculum. The California Institute of Technology has constantly held courses under review so far as quality of content is concerned; with the question of pressure, quantity of content has become a major concern and will be the principal item on the agenda for continuing meetings of the Committee on the Freshman Year.

There is at present no visible pressure from either students or faculty for extending Pass-Fail on a class-wide basis beyond the freshman year. The faculty is aware that versions of limited Pass-Fail opportunities exist on other campuses in certain upper-division courses. It is quite possible that at some later time the faculty, out of its strong desire to encourage intellectual exploration, may join this trend and allow an elective course outside the major to be taken on a voluntary Pass-Fail basis.

Statement prepared by Foster Strong
Dean of Freshmen and Associate
Professor of Physics

Appendix C

QUESTIONNAIRE ON PASS-FAIL PRACTICES

The purpose of this questionnaire is to determine the status of the pass-fail option at your institution. Most responses can be made with a check (✓). Please feel free to write in the margin. You will note that the questionnaire is in two parts: Part I seeks factual information, Part II asks for evaluations about the program's success.

PART I - INFORMATION

1. The pass-fail option is open to:

- ☐ Freshmen
- ☐ Sophomores
- ☐ Juniors
- ☐ Seniors
- ☐ Graduate students

2. The option is available in:

- ☐ All schools and colleges
- ☐ Selected schools

- ☐ Selected departments

3. The option is available

- ☐ In any course
- ☐ Only in elective courses outside the student's major
- ☐ Other _____

4. How many "pass-fail" courses may a student take in a semester (term) _____, or academic year _____, or in the course of his career in college _____?
5. How is the option graded? Is either the "pass" or "fail" somehow registered in a student's cumulative average?
6. How long has this option been available to the student body?

- ☐ One semester
- ☐ One year
- ☐ Two years
- ☐ Three years
- ☐ _____

PART II - EVALUATION

1. In your judgement has the option met with success?

Name and Title of Respondent

NOTE: The report on this study will be sent to this person

Office of Institutional Studies
University of Massachusetts
February, 1967

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING!